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SUBJECT: PERSONNEL SHUFFLES ROCK STATE MEDIA GIANT

REF: 08ANKARA719

Classified By: PAS Counselor Thomas Leary, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1.(U) Summary and Comment: Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) is undergoing an identity crisis as the media giant appears to be caught in the latest tug of war between so-called secularists and Islamists. The debate was sparked by a recent personnel reshuffle at TRT which is part of a larger reorganization plan authorized by Parliament earlier this year. The shuffle has drawn criticism from those who view the radical wave of internal appointments, as an attempt by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to replace the professional staff with party loyalists. TRT management and AKP government officials maintain the changes are a part of a long overdue streamlining effort. While partisan appointments are nothing new to TRT, the high number of appointments in a short time frame led to complaints that the AKP is aiming at replacing TRT's constitutionally-guaranteed independent programming with programming of a more Islamist bent. AKP critics can be expected to raise their voice against any such perceived AKP consolidation of public media power in the lead up to March 2009 local elections. End summary and comment.

12. (C) Shortly after being appointed TRT Director General two years ago, Ibrahim Sahin, a successful businessman known for his skill in reorganizing bloated companies, immediately began devising a reorganization plan for the state broadcaster. His most recent project was the successful rejuvenation of state postal corporation PTT from a stodgy bureaucracy in the red to an efficient profit making company. At TRT, Sahin drafted a plan that included cutting thousands of personnel and retooling the company's four terrestrial TV channels to be more entertaining, more focused and better able to exploit 21st century technology. In discussions with Embassy officers, Sahin justified his ideas, pointing out, for example, that TRT was burdened with thousands of employees in regional bureaus while commercial news channels provide the same coverage with one or two employees in each regional capitol.

13. (C) After Parliament's June 11th passage of Sahin's plan (reftel 08ANKARA719 and 08ANKARA1091) he immediately began implementation. In late September, nearly 970 senior administrators accepted early retirement packages and 600 other senior media managers were reassigned to positions as researchers. However, evidence began to mount that many of the new hires lacked basic management skills and were unprepared for senior management positions. One recent example is the appointment of a Washington Bureau Chief - arguably one of the most prestigious reporting jobs for any Turkish media outlet - who speaks very little English and has never served in a foreign bureau before.

14. (C) Reha Atasagun, TRT's web news service chief who formerly served as TRT's Washington Bureau Chief, told us, I have never seen anything like this in my 38 years at TRT., Reha noted the purges, and hiring of ill-qualified

new employees had caused extremely low morale, which she expected to continue to plummet as subsequent purges, expected next January come like the waves of Ergenekon arrests., While Reha plans to retire next year, she is concerned with the effects this reorganization will have on TRT after experienced professionals like her move on. Correspondent and producer for TRT,s news service Murat Hizal commented that the new wave of appointments seeks to create a mouthpiece for not just the AKP but also for Islamists., In fact, President of the Contemporary Journalists Association Ahmet Abakay posited that many of the new senior managers only have high school degrees from imam hatip religious schools, or possess other similar conservative bona fides. Abakay admitted that every government has sought to leave its imprint on the state broadcast network, but Abakay stressed that he viewed the AKP leaders as opportunists who are taking advantage of the political capital they have gained through EU reforms in order to create a new class of journalists comprised of Islamists and AKP-sympathizers., MHP Vice Chairman Faruk Bal told us, TRT has become highly politicized, as part of a wider trend of AKP consolidating power in the bureaucracy.,

15. (C) AKP MP Nurettin Akman, who defended the personnel changes, told us, TRT had 9,000 employees and 3,000 of them were collecting salaries but never coming to work., Akman said PM Erdogan had long realized that TRT needed a massive restructuring to get rid of the dead wood., Akman told us the PM believed Ibrahim Sahin was a competent person with a solid public administration background who could successfully tackle the job.

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